



Assisting Those Who Sacrifice

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Texans enthusiastically support the men and women who serve our country in the U.S. armed forces. So we were dismayed to hear news reports earlier this year of substandard facilities at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington used by wounded soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The reports prompted numerous questions, even in Texas. Did those unacceptable conditions extend to other military health care sites? Are our injured soldiers given the best care? Is adequate assistance available as they navigate the complicated military/veterans health care and benefits system?

Early last month, I went over these questions with wounded servicemen and women, their families, veterans, administrators, medical personnel and veterans' representatives at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. Brooke is a modern facility treating an increasing number of those who are injured from the war against terrorism, including virtually all burn victims from Iraq.

What I learned was reassuring. The quality of medical care at Brooke is world-class. Its staff is both dedicated and skilled. The facility is considered the crown jewel of U.S. military medicine. Two commissions currently are reviewing care at Defense Department facilities around the globe, and I'm confident that Brooke will receive high marks.

Even so, in a roundtable with veterans' representatives, I heard numerous helpful suggestions for improving assistance for our wounded veterans and their families, particularly in reducing bureaucratic hurdles as they transition to civilian life. After this visit, I also talked with spouses of injured soldiers, who pointed out the unintended consequences of some regulations.

Recommendations from the review commissions will be published within a few months. But I wanted to ensure that Congress addressed any issues that could be identified and corrected immediately. Those who serve are the finest our nation has to offer, and we owe them no less.

So last week I introduced Senate legislation that would provide immediate assistance to wounded service members and their families by correcting inequities and strengthening current law.

The bill would help burn victims obtain housing and automobile assistance, and ensure that other wounded service members and veterans with specific needs receive housing and other

grants. As the injured await their final Veterans Administration disability rating—a process that can take months—it would make certain they have suitable housing.

These adjustments are the direct result of my conversations with soldiers, family members and veterans support group volunteers. The bill has been greeted enthusiastically by key Senators. I'm optimistic it will become law soon.

The Walter Reed controversy, an unhappy episode, has reminded me of several important lessons. One is that scandal, if addressed in the proper spirit, can lead to needed reforms that might otherwise be overlooked.

Another reminder concerns the way those of us in public life receive information. In Washington, particularly, there are thousands of lobbyists, interest groups, trade associations and other interested parties pressing a particular point of view.

Yet as is often the case, the best insights my staff and I received on this issue came from Texans who live and deal with these concerns every day. I especially learned from Christy Patton, a mother of five whose husband was severely burned in Iraq, and Rosie Babin, whose injured son will require her loving care for many years to come.

I also got invaluable help from the “thousand points of light,” including volunteers from the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, American G.I. Forum, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and Military Officers Association of America.

I believe this legislation, while not a major departure from policy, will provide needed clarity and assistance for many wounded soldiers, veterans and their families. It is a small step toward meeting our national obligation to those who have sacrificed to protect our freedoms.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column